

**ALBANIA: HOW CLOSE IS ITALY?**  
**ALBANIAN-ITALIAN RELATIONS IN THE POST-COLD WAR**  
**ENVIRONMENT: MANAGING THREATS OR OPPORTUNITIES?**

Albert Rakipi\*  
*Albanian Institute for International Studies*

Italy's relationship with Albania is a recurrent theme of Albanian foreign policy debates. While points of view differ,<sup>1</sup> there is no escaping the fact that Italy is of primary importance to Albania because of cultural links, migratory patterns, foreign direct investment and security factors. Hence, bilateral cooperation with Italy has been high on the agenda of consecutive post-communist Albanian governments. But, the Italian perspective towards Albania has been a great deal more ambiguous and fraught with internal tensions that flow from two sources. First, Italy's "Albania policy" has been very active in supplying economic and security aid to Albania and has made Italy's voice an important one in Tirana. However, after the initial optimism abated, Italy has tended to react rather than act on Albanian affairs mainly due to the fact that it perceived Albania as a source of potential security threats rather than a potential partner with whom it could do long-term business. Second, Italy's approach to Albania has been negatively conditioned by its regional policy. For economic and strategic reasons, Italy's regional policy has focused on Serbia as the security *Schwerpunkt* of the Balkans. While the goal of stabilizing Serbia is a sensible one, Italian actions on the ground have often weighed in favour of untenable solutions (i.e. keeping the Yugoslav Federation together or shoring up the Milosevic regime), thus harming Italian interests in the long-run. The tensions within the

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\* Albert Rakipi is Chairman of Albanian Institute for International Studies (AIIS) a think tank based in Tirana, Albania. Rakipi followed a doctoral program in International Relations at Bilkent University, Ankara, Turkey. Previously he has been Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Albania and a career diplomat. He also teaches as a part time professor at the Tirana University, Faculty of History and Philology. Rakipi is the author of a number of academic works on issues dealing with democratization in the Balkans, weak states and state building processes, democracy and security in the region. Contact e-mail: arakipi@aiis-albania.org.

Albania policy as well as between it and the regional policy have ultimately harmed Italian interests in the Western Balkans and have reduced its role as an agent of change. There exists a gap between the expectations for intense, dynamic and positive Italian involvement in Albania and the actual low-key levels of bilateral cooperation.

This paper examines Albanian Italian relations in the post communist era in their three dimensions: political, economic and security. Methodologically, this examination occurs within the context of Euro-Atlantic integration. That is to say, the paper takes into account the role of Italy as a front line EU state, and one of the strongest NATO members, whereas Albania and other Western Balkan states have been committed to the EU integration process. From this perspective, developments within the EU, the EU approach towards the region, and the role Italy plays in the process provide the dynamic background within which bilateral relations ought to be analyzed. Tracing the tensions and contradictions in each of these perspectives, it concludes that Italy would benefit if it upgraded its "Albania policy" from threat management to a clearer long-term vision of partnership. However, it argues that the most effective way for achieving a mutually-beneficial partnership is to craft the pursuit of Italian interests in Albania within a larger vision of Italian *Ostpolitik*. Given that Albania will continue to remain important to Italy not only because of the "strength through weakness" of the Albanian position vis-à-vis its neighbours but also because of the economic and security benefits of seamless cooperation between the two countries, an Italian *Ostpolitik*<sup>2</sup> that encompasses the region as a whole rather than its individual parts would be a more effective tool to further Italian, EU and regional interests.

Following the demise of the communist regime, Albanian-Italian relationships have been influenced by three main factors: the historical legacy of bilateral relationships, regional instability and the grave internal crises that accompanied Albania's transition to democracy. Historically, the Otranto Strait between the two countries has served more as a communication bridge than as a barrier to cooperation.<sup>3</sup> Starting with the Ottoman invasion, Albanian migration to Italy created diaspora communities that powerfully influenced the creation of Albanian national consciousness and facilitated Italian cultural penetration in the Albanian worldview. Despite some historical problems such as the Fascist invasion of Albania, this worldview has remained particularly open and

welcoming to Italy. From a cultural and human perspective, geographical proximity has favoured and encouraged permanent communication between the two nations.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, relations between the two sovereign states have been powerfully influenced by the geopolitical setting of both countries: every strong power that has arisen in the Apennine peninsula has had the tendency to expand into the Balkans by using Albania as a bridgehead. On the other hand, whenever a powerful state has emerged in the Balkan Peninsula, it has tended to reach the Adriatic coast and to use Albania as a springboard for expansion to the West.<sup>5</sup> In more recent times, although there is a clear tendency for geo-economics to supersede geo-politics, the geopolitical setting has remained an important factor that helps explain modern relations between the two countries especially when considering the way Italy views Albania.

Secondly, the violent instability that turned the Balkans into a security importing region undermined the capacity to build long-lasting, institutionalized relationships between the two countries and favoured quick, reactive actions on the part of Italy to deal with the regular flare-ups in Balkan violence. Economic cooperation became low priority while crisis management understandably topped the Italian regional policy list. Despite recent improvements, the lack of a clear status for Kosovo, the ambiguity of the relationship between Serbia and Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina's institutional fragility have created a perception of insecurity in Farnesina's conceptualization of Western Balkans.

Last, but not least the political, social and economic crises of post communist Albania, which have been followed by massive migration waves of Albanians towards Italian coasts have played a decisive role in bilateral relations. Not only have they prompted Italy to respond quickly to the dynamic changes in Albanian security, but they have also had a powerful impact on the way Italy perceived Albania. The latter has proved a powerful conditioner on Italian policies towards Albania. The Italian view of Albania as a source of instability and security threat has created expectations of unpredictability for bilateral relations and, has kept Italian policy-making in "emergency gear" even when Albanian realities were conducive of more long-term cooperative approaches.

### ***1.1 The Political Dimension***

The first non-communist Albanian Government formed after the elections of March 31, 1992 actively sought to put an end to the long and extreme isolation of the country, through establishing and strengthening relations with the West. For historical and cultural reasons as well as bilateral interest, the establishment of a mutually beneficial partnership with Italy became one of the primary objectives of Albanian diplomacy. This openness in foreign policy was not only intended to address security issues: the Albanian Government laid its hopes for the country's economic recovery and transformation on Western assistance and Italy responded promptly and generously.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, Italy represented the symbol of the West in popular Albanian culture—no surprise given that Italian state television *RAI* had virtually been Albanians' only window to the west. The Albanian people as well as the Albanian elite nurtured high expectations towards the role of the neighbouring country for Albania's revitalization. Such high expectations also derived from the belief that Italy had maintained a long silence during the Cold War, and the time had come to somehow restore "the debt of long silence and inattention."<sup>7</sup>

That is not to say that bilateral relations have been poor. On the contrary, the determination of both parties to strengthen relations as well as the fact that no political problems existed between the two countries, have brought about a constant increase of political dialogue. In 1995, the two countries signed the Treaty of Friendship and Co-operation, the first to be signed with a Western country since the regime change in Tirana. In 1996, Italian President Scalfaro visited Albania, and gave assurances of Italian support for the transformation and economic revival of Albania. The Socialist administration maintained the good tempo in political contacts with Premier Berlusconi and Prime Minister Nano developing a close personal relationship as well. It seems that this will continue after the rotation of power in Tirana following the elections of July 2005—the first visit abroad of Prime Minister Berisha was in Italy at the invitation of Mr. Berlusconi. During more than one and a half decade, the parties have maintained a good political understanding on their role and contribution in the context of regional initiatives. Thus, for instance, in the context of the Stability Pact, Italy has insisted for more attention towards the so-called Western Balkans.

Nevertheless, Albanian-Italian relations followed the broader pattern of West-East developments, where the initial wave of enthusiasm was soon after overshadowed by uncertainty, since more time was needed to accommodate to the new situation in order to better understand the challenges and opportunities arising from the collapse of communism. Within this climate of general uncertainty between East and West, Albanian-Italian relations fell below expectations despite remarkable achievements. There were four specific reasons for this: (a) despite initial hopes, Albania did not prove to be the promised land for Italian investments; (b) Albanian instability produced massive out-migration towards Italy thus de-facto downgrading Albania from a potential partner to a source of threats and destabilization in Italy's perceptions; (c) the tension between friendship with Albania and a regional policy that oscillated between Serbia-centred and Serbia-friendly made Italian intentions seem more ambiguous and Albania more cautious; (d) Italian perceptions that Albania had to choose between Rome or Athens as opposed to Rome and Athens. Despite a powerful reservoir of good will on the part of both nations, these differences in perceptions had a negative impact on the state of political relationships.

From the very beginning, Italian enthusiasm was dampened by the poverty, economic decline and social unrest that was the Albanian reality in the early nineties. The initial assumption that Albania would become the "promised land for investments" was associated with hesitancy: the ways to exploit such opportunity were rather vague, at least in the perspective of political discourse. On 11 November 1992, these fears were well-articulated in Italy's leading newspaper *Corriere della Sera*, which published an article entitled "Is Albania Italy's DDR..."<sup>8</sup> Not only did the massive waves of refugees and, later, illegal immigrants Italy show that Italy lacked a clear vision on how to deal with its long-lost neighbour but they also caused an internal identity crisis in Italy. The noted Italian columnist, Enzo Biagi, commented thus on the chaos of 8-15 August 1991 caused by the first dramatic wave of refugees herded in a stadium and ultimately expelled back to Albania:

The dream of the Albanians has dissolved, but so too has that of the Italians. The fifth industrial power in the world has not been capable, in three days, of distributing ten thousand cups of coffee ... Those plastic sacks of water thrown from above to the dehydrated

immigrants, those sandwiches scattered by the soldiers into the scrambling mob—it was like being in a zoo.<sup>9</sup>

This age of uncertainty was reflected in Italy's erratic behaviour: during the 1992 election campaign, the Italians publicly supported the Socialists because of the close links between the Democratic Party and the United States. Yet, given the extent of the country's bankruptcy and the depth of popular resentment towards the ex-Communists, the fact that Italy backed a losing horse is more indicative of the failure of Italian diplomacy to recognize Albanian reality than the unpredictability of the latter.

The ambiguity of political discourse in the early 90s was not only due to the question "how to manage the big change" but it was also linked to the political character of such relations. Whereas pro Italian sentiments were popular in Albania at the time, and no hard feelings persisted from the Second World War, a significant degree of prudence was necessary lest this new era of relations resembled a client-patron relationship. It is likely that the Albanian government interpreted the request of the Italian Government to extend the mission of the Pelikan Operation<sup>10</sup> in Albania in light of this concern when it decided to turn it down.<sup>11</sup>

Another factor impacting bilateral relations is a contradiction inherent in Italy's regional policy—and "the Albanian national question" that is a key piece of the regional puzzle—and Italian policies towards the Albanian state. Italy's economic penetration in Serbia<sup>12</sup> during the Milosevic regime, symbolized by the signing of several large contracts in the field of telecommunications between Italy and Serbia,<sup>13</sup> strongly influenced Italy's stance towards Kosovo. Fear of undue German influence in Italy's "backyard" and the perception of Serbia as the strategic pivot of the Balkans have been reflected<sup>14</sup> in a more "pro-Serbian" attitude on the part of Italy when compared to other Western nations. While this has not impacted Albanian-Italian relations directly, it has made it easier for successive Tirana governments to strategically prioritize relations with Washington and has contributed to an atmosphere of "silent suspicion" in Tirana's political circles of Italy's intentions towards Albania.

However, the affinity Italy has usually reflected towards Serbia does not automatically translate into hostility towards Albanians in the

Balkans and Kosovo in particular. Traditional Italian-German rivalry has been put forward to explain Italy's stance

Italy has a vital interest in preventing the Balkans from becoming subject to the German Sphere of influence. That result would damage Italy's economic and commercial relations with the region and with all of Eastern Europe, as well as run contrary to Italy's status and its foreign relations policy.<sup>15</sup>

This reasoning is however questionable. First, because it derives from the old understanding of geopolitics where rivalry and conflict of interests determined mutual perceptions and relationships. Second, because Italy has strategic interests in the whole region, and exclusivity with one member of the region at the expense of the rest of the region could seriously damage this strategic goal. On the brink of Yugoslavia's dissolution, Serbia was considered by Italy as well as by other European countries as a key player for the region's stability. By supporting the continuity of the Yugoslav Federation and then the stability of the Milosevic regime, Italy aimed to preserve the status quo even though that implied support of autocratic regimes in a setting where this was not only unethical but also untenable. While this problem was not specific to Italy—the USA also supported a “negative stability” at the beginning—Italy proved to be more resistant to adapting its policies to the internal dynamics of the region. Yet, it is difficult to measure to what extent Albanian perceptions towards Italy have been influenced by her “pro-Serbian” attitude, at least until the Kosovo conflict of 1999. In a 2004 opinion poll, Albanians evaluate with almost the maximum score the importance the Government should pay to strengthening relations with Kosovo,<sup>16</sup> and indicate Italy as the most important European partner (with 8.61 points out of ten).<sup>17</sup> Obviously, Albanians in proper Albania nurture special feelings towards Albanians in Kosovo, Macedonia or Montenegro. Nevertheless, domestic crises and serious economic problems that have characterized post-communist Albania have prevented her from looking beyond her borders. Yet, from the point of view of bilateral relations, the Italian stand in the Contact Group has been a sensitive issue for successive Albanian governments.<sup>18</sup> Now that the final talks on Kosovo's status have begun, there is a new chance for an assertive, inclusive regional approach that views the region as a whole as

opposed to centred on one particular state. This is facilitated by the fact that all countries in the region have now embarked on the process of Euro-Atlantic integration which has provided them with a common language and powerful incentives for cooperation.

Despite the strength of the post Cold War cooperation regimes in European state relations, in regional affairs the traditions of realist competition for spheres of influence continue to be relevant. This may be illustrated by looking at the Italian-Albanian-Greek *ménage à trois*—a relationship that contains all of these trends however contradictory they may be. While Greek-Albanian relations do not concern us directly, it is important to point out that an atmosphere of mutual jealousy has often characterized the Albanian commitments of these two EU countries.<sup>19</sup>

The jealousy is not unjustified—in Albania, debates over the role Italy and Greece may play in supporting Albania's EU integration process tend to pose the dilemma "Rome or Athens?"<sup>20</sup> However, this dilemma originates primarily from the internal political struggle between democrats and socialists,<sup>21</sup> rather than from the country's foreign policy. This dilemma is built on the doubtful assumption that integration is an external process, while it is clear that the preparation of Albania to become a EU member is first and foremost dependant on the success of internal reforms. While the creation of internal EU coalitions to support one's membership will be key once a country has complied with the Copenhagen criteria, these coalitions are less helpful in the early stages of transition. Moreover, the tactic of playing one potential partner against another is counter-productive. Hence, Albania has attempted to escape this dilemma and operate through another approach: "Both Rome and Athens," instead of "Rome or Athens."<sup>22</sup>

Italy and Greece sometimes have been protagonists in this old-fashioned *realpolitik*. For instance, the persistence of both Italian and Greek governments to allocate their military contingents in the framework of Operation Alba respectively in areas such as Vlora and Korça was officially justified with the necessity to undertake responsibilities for the management of security issues in the respective borders. Nevertheless, agreement over the map of distribution of the multinational European force (Operation Alba) was difficult, and the tendency to allocate troops in former strategic zones became evident. Historical legacies have an unfortunate way of becoming relevant in the most unfortunate moments.



### ***1.2 The Economic Dimension***

Looking at Albanian-Italian relations from the economic perspective it is not difficult to distinguish the Italian style of foreign policy towards the Balkans: Italy is not a military power, its geopolitics must be integrative, not expansive, and based on cultural and commercial relations (small and mid-sized Italian enterprises).<sup>23</sup> Within this strategy, the economic presence of Italy in Albania has been subject to growth without marking significant peaks, but rather through a horizontal expansion with small and medium enterprises, signed by a steady and noteworthy cultural component that gives it solidity.

Italy contributed to and was in charge of international assistance during a critical moment for Albania in 1991-1992. Italy is the main donor of Albania in bilateral arrangements.<sup>24</sup> Italian assistance is mainly concentrated in infrastructure development, human resources development and institution-building, which match the current needs of Albanian economy.<sup>25</sup>

Statistics indicate that Italy is the main economic partner of Albania. Italy is ranked first in the field of investments.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, Italy is ranked first in the list of Albania's trade partners, and it makes up 40 percent of Albanian trade transactions with foreign countries. From a promising start in 1992-1993 economic relations dropped steadily due to the 1997 crisis.<sup>27</sup> However, in the regional context Italy has supported infrastructure projects, as for instance Corridor 8, the realization of which could bring Albania considerable economic benefits. Overall, the economic dimension of bilateral relations has been the least problematic of the three dimensions.

### ***1.3 The Security Dimension***

Nowhere are the three factors that we identified at the beginning of this paper—historical legacy, regional violence and instability and Albania's chronic security crises—as structural determinants of Albanian-Italian relations better illustrated than in the security dimension of this relationship. In a region plagued with historical animosities, violent instability and security vacuum, the dynamics of security sector cooperation play a central part in the perceptions of different actors towards each other and the subsequent political moves that determine the state of bilateral relations. While the political dimension of these relations remains primary because that is where actor agency determines the

outcome of the process, the security dimension provides the structural background that constrains or enables particular behavioural patterns on the part of the actors.

From a security perspective, strengthening relations with Italy has been of primary importance to Albania. A weak state, with an almost bankrupt economy, and scarce defence capacity, in an unstable region where historical animosities were awakened almost overnight, needed support in addressing security issues through the formation of alliances or close bilateral security cooperation. Thus, Albania was the first of the former Warsaw Treaty members to apply for NATO membership (December 1992), while it simultaneously sought to strengthen bilateral relations with the Euro-Atlantic alliance members, including Italy. Strengthening relations with Italy was not only imperative because Italy is a NATO member but also since the geographic setting of the two countries and their mutually compatible value systems allow for complementarity in security goals. Besides seeking alliance-seeking, the first non-communist administration also focused on the reformation of defence forces, in order to adapt them to the new political system as well as enhance their reliability in case of conflict. Italy, along with USA, Germany and Turkey were the main supporters of the restructuring process of Albanian armed forces. Since 1992 many Albanian military officials have attended the Italian Defence Academy, while Italy continues to provide assistance, through material and technological support and training programs for armed forces<sup>28</sup> and law enforcement bodies. Overall, the level of cooperation in the security sector has been satisfactory and productive in generating the stability necessary for Albania's economic and political development. Now Albania is well into the NATO membership process having accepted an ambitious Partnership Goals package in 2002 that is designed to make the country ready for membership by 2010. Without Italian initiatives in Operation Pelican (1992) and Italian leadership in the multinational Operation Alba (1997), as well as all the other forms of aid enumerated above, it is highly doubtful that Albania would have gotten so far.

However, in order to comprehend better Italian perceptions of Albania as the *sine qua non* of understanding post-communist Albanian Italian relations, we have to view bilateral security relations through the three prisms enumerated above. First, the historical legacy of cultural affinity but bilateral competition and suspicion was the least important

factor of the three. Albanian historical memory favoured the retention of the cultural ties while the Fascist invasion and the distrust of the interwar period were largely, if not completely, forgotten. While in the early nineties Albania tended to oscillate between close military cooperation with Italy due to the acute needs of the country and distrust of Italian intentions, after 1995 the political will of both countries favoured close relations and they were reflected in numerous initiatives and institutional ties between the security structures of both countries.

The second factor is related to the imminent security concerns originating from Yugoslavia's dissolution and regional destabilisation. Even if Albania was not to be involved in the conflict, it could potentially become the main bridge for exporting insecurities to the Italian coasts. Moreover, the threats deriving from the region were not traditional security threats. Instead, they were related to massive migration flows, the rise of organized crime and other non-state structures whose tentacles could spread to Italy through migration. In order to justify continued Italian involvement in the region, Italian Foreign Minister Beniamino Andreatta warned Italians in 1993 that "Italy no longer simply follows other countries, but has to be prepared and able to act too."<sup>29</sup>

Last, but not least, the chronic crises of post communist Albania created a perception of Albania as a threat to be managed rather than an opportunity. The 1991 crisis, followed by massive refugee waves towards the Italian coast, dampened initial enthusiasm about the re-emergence of the old neighbour and constituted the first alert of a new security concern. Further on, the 1997 crisis reinforced the belief that neighbouring Albania was a serious security concern. Italy became heavily engaged in resolving this crisis, through political action and direct assistance in the restoration of law and order. In this context, the Albanian crisis was an opportunity for Italy to assume a decisive role in regional developments, and it represented a test for Italian ambitions and capacity to successfully address these pressing security issues. Indeed, the whole Albanian case was seen very much as a test case for Italy in terms of its credibility in the EU and Atlantic Alliance.<sup>30</sup>

Finally, the generally weak state of security institutions in Albania was another factor under consideration in Italy: Albania continued to be the most convenient transit way to Italy and the EU for third nationals—not only from the region, but from the Middle East and Asia as well. Thus, a considerable number of bilateral agreements in the security field

aim at addressing issues relating to border management and control, prevention of illegal migration, illegal trafficking, and organised crime.<sup>31</sup>

### *Conclusions: Managing Threats or Opportunities?*

Albanian Italian relations have been intensive during the last one and a half-decade, especially from the political perspective. Economically, Italy is the most important partner of Albania, in terms of investments and trade exchange volume. In addition, military and security co-operation with Italy has been thorough and highly valued by Albanian authorities. However, despite all the arguments in favour of the good achievements in bilateral relations and co-operation, some scholars assert that they could have been taken further. The assumption that Italy is still maintaining a low profile in Albania, as well as in the Balkans is widely accepted. This belief may originate from the originally high expectations of Albanian society with regard to the role Italy could have assumed in the Balkans due to geographical proximity and Albanian affinity towards Italian culture.<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, a more profound analysis of bilateral relations reveals that the level of political relationships between the two countries has lagged behind the economic one,<sup>33</sup> although both post 1990 administrations—Democratic and Socialist—have assigned priority to relations with Italy. According to local economic experts, although Italy still remains Albania's principal economic partner, no considerable progress has been marked in the field, and Italian investments have only been restored to pre-1997 crisis quotes.<sup>34</sup>

Leaving aside the high expectations of the Albanian elite, relations between the two countries have been close, ever more dynamic and fruitful. Yet, Italy has gained little more than the stabilization of its volatile neighbour while Albanians remain convinced that Italy could be more actively involved. Indeed, Italy is capable of playing a greater role in Albania. Thus, during the 1997 crisis, the Italian Government mediated between the government (Democratic Party) and the opposition (Socialist Party). They accepted this reconciliation attempt, despite the deep divergences existing among the two.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, Italy has assumed a more active role in Albania in the context of the European Union. During the 1997 crisis in Albania, the European Union showed reluctance in sending military troops upon the request of Albanian President Berisha. Nonetheless, Italy responded to this request for assistance. Naturally, this Italian initiative was largely motivated by Italy's security interests in

re-establishing law and order and stability in the neighbouring country. The multinational force that was allocated in Albania consisted of European troops, but it never became a EU mission.<sup>36</sup> After the conclusion of Operation Alba, Rome was the organizing capital for the international conference on Albania on 31 July 1997, and later on of several other meetings, among which a donor's conference in October 1997, which encouraged the participation of many countries and international organizations. This example illustrates how active Italian involvement can be highly beneficial to both countries.

The unexplored potentials of the relationship may be emphasized when considering that the highest and most intensive level of political relations between the two countries was experienced during the Albanian crises of the 1990s. According to Roberto Morozzo della Rocca, Italian policy towards Albania has always been sporadic, merely at limiting threats: "a firm and permanent interest of the Italian government towards Albania seems almost unlikely in the absence of potential crises or commotions on the other side of the Adriatic."<sup>37</sup> Thus, rather than economic opportunity and mutually beneficial security and political cooperation, Rome has generally perceived Albania as a source of instability and security threats. The diplomatic version of this argument can be found on the official site of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs—Balkan Section.

The Western Balkans and particularly Albania seem to be trapped in this perception of a portal from where dangers emerge and behind which threats lurk. While this is not unjustified, the danger of Albanian and non-Albanian migratory waves have usually been inflated even at the worst of times. Allegations of a weak stand towards Albanian migration put Prodi's government in serious difficulty in 1997. However, the phenomenon was magnified in terms of size and potential threat, while in reality it barely amounted to ten thousand people, most of which women and children. Ever since, Albania has ceased being a transit country for illegal immigrants while its contribution as a country of origin has also been minimized thanks to the resources that Albanian, Italian and other Western countries have poured into combating human trafficking.

The inflated danger of migratory waves, especially in relation to the exportation of organized crime in the European Union through Italy as an EU front line state, has influenced policy priorities of some EU countries (including Italy) concerning the Balkans and Albania in particular.

The priority of the international community and the European Union in particular remains higher security of international borders in order to reduce illegal migration, monitoring and relocate emigrants while the needs of the origin countries are not taken under serious consideration.<sup>38</sup> Financial support has also been channelled according to this priority. Accordingly, in the case of Albania, from 2002 to 2004 the EU has agreed to spend 49 million pounds on issues relating to border management, police and judiciary reform, but only 29 million on economic and social development.<sup>39</sup>

However, stronger Italian interest in Albania would be justified by Albanian needs and the strategic interest Italy has expressed in creating an alternative Southern axis as opposed to the "Northern axis" of Europe.<sup>40</sup> Italy has already assumed a privileged role in the relations of the European Union with Albania. As an Italian diplomat says, "the ultimate aim of Italy's policy in the Balkans must be to integrate the entire area with itself and with Europe through the agency of Italy."<sup>41</sup> However, it is unclear how Italian actions on the ground so far have contributed to that goal. It was mainly due to Italian and Greek efforts that the Western Balkans was included with priority in the EU agenda in the Thessaloniki summit, thus offering for the first time a European perspective to these often 'forgotten' neighbours. Moreover, Albania considers Italy as an advocate within the European Union.

Thus, a new "Italian *Ostpolitik*"—a policy that aims at projecting and deepening Italy's presence in Southeastern Europe—needs to be put in place.<sup>42</sup> Italian strategic considerations and Albanian wishes converge at this point. Such an *Ostpolitik* would first and foremost aim to clear the ambiguity surrounding Italian views of the region, an ambiguity that was accepted by Romano Prodi when he stated: "a rapidly changing world means that we must have a clear idea of what lies in our power to achieve and where we are heading even before we grapple with the problems of the present or come to terms with the events of our past."<sup>43</sup>

Calls for a new role of Italy in the Balkans and Adriatic where Albania would be an important factor and enjoy its benefits have started to emerge in the light of new developments in the context of EU enlargement. Italian former Minister of Foreign Affairs Gianni De Michelis remarked that EU enlargement towards northeast should induce Italy to accelerate the integration of the Balkans into the larger European family. Otherwise, the establishment of "Baltic Europe" would, in geo-

political terms, inexorably leave Italy in Europe's peripheral margins. With the accession of the Balkans into EU, the geopolitical balance will be restored.<sup>44</sup>

More than half a century ago, Ahmet Zog, King of Albanians would write: "I fear a weak Italy. I do not fear a strong Italy. A strong Italy is the Italy that wishes for a stable, well-organized and independent Albania." Zog's maxim preserves its relevance in the modern world: even more than during the agitated times of his reign in Albania, his geopolitical thinking is relevant in the actual developments of Italian-Albanian relations.

### Notes

1. For an outline of the predominating Albanian position that emphasizes the need to strengthen bilateral cooperation, see Sabri Godo, *Korrieri*, October 5, 2005.

2. The goals of such an *Ostpolitik* have already been outlined by Italy's former Foreign Minister, Gianni De Michelis: using Italian agency to stabilize the region and integrate it in the EU in order to counter the creation of a "Baltic Europe" which in geopolitical terms would consign Italy to Europe's periphery. See Gianni De Michelis, "Ballkani: Cështje Jetike për Italinë," *Shekulli*, quoted in Center for Strategic & International Studies, *limes, Italy and the Balkans*, Vol. XX, No. 2 (1998), 47.

3. Bernd Fischer, "Italian Policy in Albania," *Balkan Studies* XI, (1985), 101.

4. Communication was severely limited during the communist regime in Albania, due to the country's auto isolation policy. However, some communication persisted: Italy was the only Western country that was still present in Albania.

5. Stavro Skendi, *East-Central Europe: Albania*, European Studies Centre of the Free Europe Committee (London: Atlantic Press, 1957), 1.

6. For details of the Italian program of humanitarian assistance for Albania, see Elez Biberaj, *Albania: The Rocky Road to Democracy* (Boulder, CO: 1998), 235.

7. Interview with Ismail Kadare, 1992.

8. Quoted from "Roma dhe Tirana: Konvergjenat paralele," *Politika dhe Shoqëria* 1, No. 10 (2002), 126.

9. E. Biagi, "Niente Spaghetti," *Corriere della Sera*, 12 August 1991; quoted in Paul Ginsborg, *Italy and its Discontents* (London: Penguin Books, 2001), 63.

10. In 1991-1992, the Italian Government initiated an assistance program, in which it allocated approximately 900 military troops in Durres Port, Albania, to help deliver international humanitarian aid. This program was undertaken mainly due to the pressure of refugee waves fleeing Albania for Italy.

11. During a visit to Albania of the Italian Minister of Defence in December 1993, Albanian President Sali Berisha declared that Albania was ready to expand military cooperation, but that it would preserve "its own identity and sovereignty". Biberaj, *Albania in Transition*, 236.

12. One year before NATO's intervention in Kosovo, Italy was Serbia's second largest trading partner. See, Roberto Morozzo della Rocca, "Italy and the United States: Two

Approaches to the Kosovo Crisis Center for Strategic & International Studies, *limes, Italy and the Balkans*, Vol. XX, No. 2 (1998), 48.

13. Arben Kola, "Tirana-Rome: The Adriatic or Kosovo in Between?" AIM Tirana, May 1998, [www.aimpress.com](http://www.aimpress.com).

14. The fact that Germany is the first trading partner of Serbia and Montenegro and its most active support of Slovenian and Croatian independence raised Italian fears in this regard.

15. Serpicus, "Why Italy helps Serbia" in "Italy and the Balkans," *Limes*, CSIS, 1998, 31.

16. Kosovo was ranked second after the EU in the list of strategic partners. See, Albanian Institute for International Studies, "Rethinking EU Integration: Albanian Perceptions and Realities," Tirana, (2005) at [www.aiis-albania.org](http://www.aiis-albania.org).

17. *Ibid.*

18. Interview with a high official of the Albanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

19. When Italy lead the Alba International Military Force, Athens dailies accused Italy of trying to appear as a regional superpower, striving to implement the *mare nostrum* dogma. Later on, when the new government was having its honeymoon with Greece, it was Rome's turn to be disgruntled and make allegations of ungratefulness. See Remzi Lani and Fabian Schmidt, "Albanian Foreign Policy between Geography and History," *The International Spectator* XXXIII, No. 2, April June 1998.

20. *Ibid.*

21. A series of political actions soon after the 1997 crisis which brought the Socialists back to power were seen as a reorientation of Albanian foreign policy towards Greece.

22. Interview with former high official of the Albanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

23. *Ibid.*

24. Financial assistance is allocated through the Office for Cooperation and Development (Ufficio di Cooperazione per lo Sviluppo). The most recent cooperation protocol was signed in April 2002 and includes the 2002-2004 period. Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

25. The financial support of the Italian Government in the above-mentioned fields amounts to 202,250 million Euros for the next three years, out of which 160 millions are allocated in the form of soft loans and 42,25 millions are donations. Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

26. More than 600 Italian-owned or joint venture businesses operate in the Albanian market. Another 1500 companies are estimated to steadily cooperate with Albania. Private investments in Albania amount to approximately 300 million USD.

27. Albanian Center for International Trade, *Albanian Foreign Trade Report*, April 2006, at <http://www.acit-al.org>.

28. The Delegation of Experts (DIE) is one of the most serious collaborations in this field, aiming at modernizing armed forces in order to comply with NATO membership criteria.

29. Alison Pargeter, *Italy and the Western Mediterranean*, Working Paper 26/1, Centre for Defence Studies, King's College London; quoted in Patrick McCarthy, *The Crisis of Italian State* (New York: St. Martin's Press 1997), 41.

30. *Ibid.*

31. The two countries signed in 1991 the *Agreement on the Fight against Organized Crime and Drug Trafficking*. The respective Ministries of Public Order have signed *Protocols of Understanding and Cooperation*. Border control is implemented in the framework of



specific agreements, such as *Memorandum of Understanding on the Creation of an Obligatory System in the Adriatic* (May 2000), *Memorandum of Co-operation in Rescue Operations*. In 1997 Italy and Albania signed the *Readmission Agreement*, which provides for the readmission into the origin country not only of the respective nationals, but also of third nationals who have entered illegally.

32. The fascist invasion of WWII or the low level of communication during the communist regime did not damage such cultural and historical bonds. In addition, the problematic associated with Albanian migration into Italy in the early nineties did not affect the perceptions of Albanian society on Italy, as was the case with Greece.

33. Lani and Schmidt.

34. Italian businesses have not shown much interest for important strategic projects, for instance in banking, telecommunications or air transport.

35. Italian Foreign Minister Lamberto Dini visited Albania in an effort to mediate between the two main parties.

36. The Albanian crisis reinforced the failure of the European Union to achieve a unified foreign policy.

37. Roberto Morozzo della Rocca "Roma dhe Tirana: Konvergjenca Paralele," *Politika dhe Shoqeria* 1, No. 10 (2002) 127.

38. Russel King, Nicola Mai, Mirela Dalipi, "Shembja e Miteve te Migrimit: Analiza dhe Rekomandime për Bashkimin Europian, Britaninë e Madhe dhe Shqipërinë," Fabian Society and Oxfam GB 2003, 107.

39. *Ibid.*

40. This hypothesis seems feasible seeing Italy's eagerness to support Turkey's EU integration process.

41. Serpicus, 33.

42. Piero Fassino, "Italy's New Ostpolitik," in *What Italy Stands for*, CSIS & Limes, Vol. XIX, No. 3, 39.

43. Romano Prodi, "Italy as a Global Player," in *What Italy Stands for*, CSIS & Limes, Vol. XIX, No. 3, x.

44. Gianni De Michelis, "Ballkani Ceshkje Jetike për Italine," quoted in *Shekulli*, January 15 2004.

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